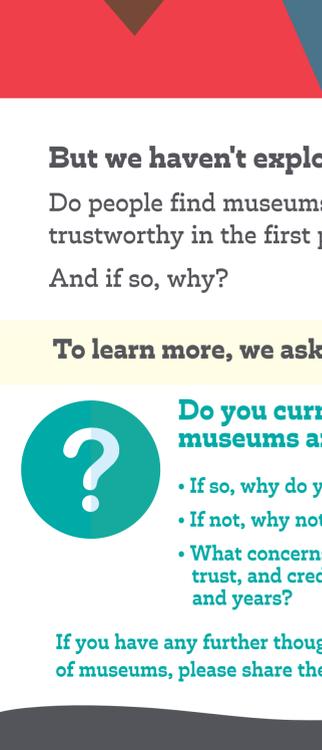


TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITY, PART 4: TRUSTING MUSEUMS IN FRAUGHT TIMES

A 2025 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

"Museums offer people an opportunity to sit in the learning, and it is imperative to be challenged in our understandings of the world. The history of museums, like everything else, is fraught, and I think we should continue to offer each other different truths, engage in repairs of the past and work towards the sharing the diversity of the human experience. I relish in a world that asks us to THINK and be open. We need it more than ever."



IN THIS SERIES of *Data Stories*, we've been exploring how museums can effectively navigate today's fraught landscape of distrust, disinformation, and polarization. We have been finding, however, pathways of shared values, credibility, community, and even curiosity and mutual respect.

But we haven't explored why.

Do people find museums trustworthy in the first place? And if so, why?



To learn more, we asked this question:

Do you currently feel that museums are trustworthy?

- If so, why do you think they are trustworthy?
- If not, why not?
- What concerns do you have about museums, trust, and credibility in the coming months and years?

If you have any further thoughts about the trustworthiness of museums, please share them here.

We then hand-coded responses from a representative (but randomly chosen) sample of 8,000 frequent museum-goers.¹

And what did they say?

YES!

Overwhelmingly, respondents said yes, museums are indeed trustworthy. In fact, only 1% of respondents said "no."

These results also validate similar findings from broader population research, indicating a broad consensus that museums are considered trustworthy.²



Why museums are credible

Four themes (and a glaring omission) came up when respondents shared why museums were credible.

Evidence and Research

This was by far the most common reason people gave for believing museums to be trustworthy. These respondents mentioned museums' use of evidence, primary sources (often cited!), rigorous research, and emphasized the importance of the "facts" that museums share.

"In my mind museums are repositories of the products of research and rigorous investigation. If museums are not credible and trustworthy, then what is?"



| FACTS: A note on language |
|---|
| This series of Data Stories has emphasized how important language is. As researchers, we pay close attention to how respondents use language, and we are hyper-aware of when those patterns shift. Sometimes, those shifts are slow and language evolves incrementally. At other times, the change happens quickly. The word "fact" is a great case in point. |
| Over the past decade, we've been tracking how the word "facts" has been championed by less inclusive people as a way to justify a narrower narrative that tends to focus on the experiences of Europeans and white people while dismissing other perspectives as "opinion." We have often seen this in the use of the phrase, "Just the facts, so we can make up our own minds," for example. |
| In 2025, the use of "facts" by less inclusive people dropped dramatically, while its usage among more inclusive people suddenly skyrocketed. But how it is being used by more inclusive people is very different. |
| These respondents, especially those who are more attuned to recent pressures on museums and other educational institutions to omit critical facts about the past, use "facts" to mean evidence-based truth telling about the past—including when it runs counter to incomplete and inaccurate, but celebratory, narratives. |

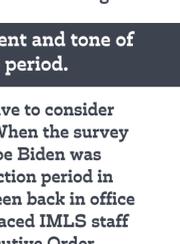
Perceptions of Truth and Accuracy

Respondents used more emotive words based on their perceptions, rather than the evidence and research museums rely on, including words like:

- ★ Truth ★ Unbiased ★ Accurate ★ Honesty

While some respondents in this category backed their perceptions by mentioning evidence or research, others acknowledged that they saw no reason for museums to lie, they had never seen intentionally incorrect information, or that they simply felt museums were trustworthy ... and left it at that.

"I do feel that museums, generally, are trustworthy as evidenced by the content and programming provided. I believe artists and art organizations strive to be truth tellers and have integrity, generally."



Diverse Content and Multiple Perspectives

These respondents valued museums for sharing a wide variety of content about the different people on this planet, for sharing multiple perspectives and different life experiences, and for being inclusive spaces and inclusive in content.

"My personal feeling is that women, minorities, LGBTQ+, and folks with learning and/or physical limitations should be celebrated and their contributions to science need to be recognized. Often science moves forward because of a unique viewpoint or idea and it takes people of all backgrounds to provide them."

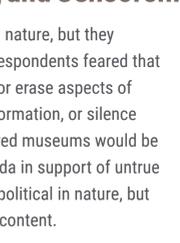


Professional Staff

And they value YOU, dear readers!

Repeatedly, respondents confidently described the people who work in museums as thoughtful, smart, caring, committed, diligent, and trustworthy professionals.

"I generally find the museums we visit (mostly STEM museums) trustworthy, because the people who end up as museum curators tend to be highly educated, intellectually curious, and ethical in their presentation of facts and history."



A Glaring Omission: Collections

What stood out just as much as what respondents mentioned was what they did not: collections. Very few respondents mentioned the objects, artwork, or archival documents that museums preserve and share.

At first glance, this appears to be in conflict with results we shared in the third *Data Story* in this series: when asked what museums could do to help visitors feel information is credible and trustworthy, the top response was "show original objects, artworks, and documents, so we can see original sources of information" (81% of respondents).³

But is it really in conflict? Perhaps not. Original objects are evidence and primary sources. Respondents to the open-ended question may have focused on process and sources, but made an assumption that objects were part of that.

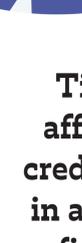
Concerns

Let's take a look at the last part of the question: **What concerns do you have about museums, trust, and credibility in the coming months and years?**



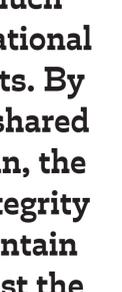
For years we've seen a small percentage of respondents articulating that museums have become too liberal, as well as a counterbalancing segment of respondents saying that museums have always been too conservative (including explicit concerns about repatriation). This didn't change.

But there were major shifts in the content and tone of responses during our survey collection period.



To understand these shifts, we have to consider what was happening nationally. When the survey opened in early January 2025, Joe Biden was president. By the end of our collection period in early April, Donald Trump had been back in office for about 10 weeks, DOGE had placed IMLS staff on administrative leave, and Executive Order 14253 concerning new guidelines for the Smithsonian Institution and the Department of Interior had made headlines.

In short, many museum-goers were alarmed by new political pressures on museums. Comments escalated, becoming more emotional in nature over the weeks. By April, responses were often lengthy, more emotional, and at times openly fearful.



Early January

The earliest responses that came in were relatively innocuous, sometimes mentioning disinformation and/or AI, but generally articulating confidence in museums.



"Yes because I still retain hope that businesses are trustworthy. I have not thought about sources that I find credible or any concerns over credibility in the coming months/years."

February - April

By the end of the data collection period, respondents consistently shared more emotive fears about how museums were going to navigate political pressures ... including fears for the safety of museum staff. These concerns reflect an unprecedented political moment rather than a gradual change in public sentiment.

Concerns fell into three categories:

New Political Threats

Comments explicitly stated political threats to museums including comments and actions made by political leaders or the general political climate.

"I currently feel that most museums are very trustworthy, and despite the chaos around us I truly hope that they remain that way. Museums are vital to the fabric of our history and the collections, researchers, and programming that they provide offer us so many ways to educate and provide support for our communities. I beg you to not bend to the will of this administration. Our history is at stake. Our communities are at stake. The way we tell our stories will be forever changed if we allow this administration to control our cultural institutions."

Whitewashing, Propaganda, and Censorship

Similarly, these comments also were political in nature, but they explicitly mentioned concerns about content. Respondents feared that political leaders would force museums to omit or erase aspects of historical content, reject accepted scientific information, or silence diverse, representative perspectives. Some feared museums would be forced to include false information or propaganda in support of untrue narratives. Most of these comments were also political in nature, but spoke specifically about concerns for museum content.

"Yes, I place my trust in museums. If they maintain their reputations for appropriate research methodology, intellectual integrity. I fear whitewashing of history, overlooking inconvenient truths. [Museums] need to follow facts, science, methodology not ideology. Credible sources should be verifiable. Results should be made public and cross referenced ... I have concerns that museum leadership will be intimidated by people who are interested in driving political agendas and opinions instead of facts. That voices and people will be persecuted, silenced and erased."

Funding Threats and Closures

These concerns centered on the use of funding as coercion. Respondents feared that funding would be used to compel compliance, including the possibility of funding cuts severe enough to force closure.

"I worry that as the current administration ties federal (and for state governments, state funding) to adherence to their demonstrably inaccurate depictions of history and culture, it will become harder for established museums to continue operating."

And yet, despite the fear, the anxiety, and the rapidly escalating political pressure, respondents did not lose trust in museums. Quite the opposite.

Ultimately, what came out of this research was one thing:

"I trust you."

Time and again, the public has affirmed its trust in museums as credible, values-driven institutions in an uncertain world. We are also finding that people have much more in common than the national narrative of division suggests. By being thoughtful about the shared values we anchor our work in, the language we use, and the integrity of our research, we can maintain and even build upon the trust the public has in us.

¹ 2025 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers: Purpose and Methodology (Update), September 11, 2025, to learn more about our coding methodologies.
² See Museums and Trust (Spring 2021, AAM + Wilkening Consulting), an update to these results will be released in February 2026.
³ Trust and Responsibility to Community, Part 3: Supporting Credibility and Trust in Museums, January 22, 2026.
⁴ Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual, sporadic, and non-visitors to museums). See the Purpose and Methodology (Update) Data Story from September 11, 2025 for more information on methodology.
 More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.